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AUTHOR Boyatzis, Chris J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that instructors of child development should use literature to supplement theory and research in their courses. It is argued that literature elucidates psychological concepts with real life examples while deepening students' appreciation for the complexity and diversity of human development. Particularly effective in achieving these goals is an autobiography by Maya Angelou, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1969). An appendix offers other literacy sources for instructors to consider. A list of 14 references is provided. (Author/GLR)

Let the caged bird sing:

Using literature to teach developmental psychology

Chris J. Boyatzis

California State University--Fullerton

Running Head: USING LITERATURE TO TEACH

Author Notes: Portions of this paper were presented at the 4th Annual Conference on the Teaching of Psychology, Springfield, MA, March 16, 1989. Deep thanks are extended to former colleagues at Wheelock College who introduced me to Angelou's book, and to my students for their rich insights about Angelou's development. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version, and Robin Jarrell for editorial assistance. Correspondence can be sent to: Department of Child Development, EC 105, California State University--Fullerton, Fullerton, CA 92634-9480.

Abstract

Reading lists of developmental psychology courses are replete with scientific theory and research, often neglecting narrative material. I argue here that instructors of child development should use literature to supplement theory and research in their courses. Literature elucidates psychological concepts with real-life examples, while deepening students' appreciation for the complexity and diversity of development. I discuss a particular source, Maya Angelou's (1969) I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, that is highly effective in teaching developmental psychology while achieving these goals. Integration of literature in the course is discussed, and an Appendix offers literary sources for instructors to consider.

Let the caged bird sing:

Using literature to teach developmental psychology

The value of narrative

I began to think about the value of literature for teaching psychology when, as a graduate student in developmental psychology, several English majors told me: "We don't need psychology to understand people; books teach us about behavior." My retort in turn reflected a bias, but one against literature: "Literature is subjective, anecdotal; it lacks objective data and theoretical frameworks. It may offer good stories, but psychology, with its scientific methods and theories, is better for discerning psychological reality." I suspect that my comments reflect the attitudes of more than a few behavioral scientists.

My response reflected the epistemological values of psychological researchers and theorists, whose thinking is what Bruner (1986, p. 12) refers to as logico-scientific or paradigmatic. This mode of thinking aims to describe reality through scientific and propositional logic, and arrive at abstract, context-independent truth. A qualititatively different mode of thought, Bruner claims, is narrative, which is concerned with concrete particulars of actual context-dependent experience. This narrative mode attempts to "locate the experience in time and place...the paradigmatic mode, by contrast, seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction" (p. 13). Bruner describes the crux of the difference between the two modes of thought: paradigmatic thought is "preoccupied with

the epistemological question of how to know truth," whereas narrative thought is concerned with "how we come to endow experience with meaning" (p. 12).

The distinction between paradigmatic and narrative thought is analogous to that between "separate" and "connected" knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Clinchy (1990, pp. 60-64) describes separate knowing thusly: "The heart of separate knowing is detachment. The separate knower holds herself aloof from the object she is trying to analyze...She follows certain rules or procedures to insure that her judgments are unbiased...The voice of separate knowing is argument," of criticism. Connected knowing, on the other hand, is an attempt to understand by sympathizing rather than criticizing. The connected knower "does not ask whether it is right; she asks what it means. When she says, Why do you think that? she doesn't mean, What evidence do you have...? She means, What in your experience led you to that position? She is looking for the story behind the idea" (Clinchy, p. 64). The voice of connected knowing, Clinchy says, is a narrative voice.

Many college students, in particular women, tend to use the epistemology of connected knowing (Belenky et al., 1986; Clinchy, 1990). However, the narrative voice is typically overlooked in theory and research; scientific psychologists rarely attempt to explain how people "endow experience with meaning." Separate knowing and the voice of argument is the norm, and accordingly our reading lists emphasize paradigmatic thinking. The underrepresentation of literature reflects the notion that its narrative account of experience is

outside the paradigm, if you will, of paradigmatic thought. The neglect of narrative experience is problematic given the common epistemology of connected knowing. Is there a value of literature in the teaching of developmental psychology?

In The call of stories, Robert Coles (1989) presents an elegant argument for the use of narrative in teaching, especially in the sciences, because as "theorists we lose sight of human particularity" (p. 21). Vitz (1990) has asserted that stories are a popular means of communication in all cultures; educators ought to attend to this "narrative need...(and) work with human nature rather than against it" (pp. 716-717). The benefit of using narrative in literature to teach psychological concepts has received empirical confirmation (e.g., Fernald, 1987; Gorman, 1984; Levine, 1983; Ramirez, 1991; Williams & Kolupke, 1986).

For several years I have used literature in my undergraduate and graduate courses to help students understand development. While literature alone is not adequate, it is complements psychology and is compatible with theory and research (e.g., Williams & Kolupke, 1986). Literature's value to teachers is precisely that which is seen from a paradigmatic perspective as its weakness. Literature uses personal, subjective experiences that help students elucidate the broader psychological issues treated in theory and research. Stories vivify theories, which students often find abstract, and, as Grant (1987) noted, literature can "humanize the stark quantitative findings of psychological research" (p. 86).

Literature is also important because it depicts the diversity in development by helping

students understand broad, complex influences (e.g., culture, social class, geography, historical era). Literature also helps students consider factors that are universal or culture-specific. As schools revise curricula to incorporate cultural diversity, psychology instructors can use literature toward this end. Literature can challenge students' values and broaden their world views. T. S. Eliot asserted that a goal of the arts was to "enlarge the sympathies"; I believe literature can achieve this while teaching developmental psychology.

For several years, I have used Maya Angelou's (1969) remarkable childhood autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, in my developmental psychology classes to illustrate topics we study via paradigmatic research and theory. Year after year students claim that this book is one of their deepest, most valuable experiences from the course, one that teaches developmental psychology while "enlarging the sympathies."

The book recounts Angelou's childhood from the preschool through adolescent years. It begins as she arrives, at age three, in Arkansas, where she and her 4-year-old brother are sent by their parents in California to live with Momma (their grandmother). Life for young Maya is not easy; she suffers family fragmentation, racism, and impoverished conditions. Much of Maya's childhood is spent in "the Store," her Momma's business, which is the family's home and a center of the Black community. Momma's authoritarian child-rearing style gives Maya stability and structure, while brother Bailey provides emotional support, affirmation, and loyal companionship. To Maya, Bailey is "my Kingdom Come" (p. 19).

Several years later, Maya is sent to live with her biological mother, Vivian, in St. Louis. There Maya is raped by her mother's boyfriend, and the tragedy causes Maya to make herself mute. The self-imposed silence lasts until she is sent back to Stamps, where she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the "aristocrat" of the Black community. Mrs. Flowers throws Maya her "first lifeline" (p. 77), drawing Maya from her silence and salvaging her self-esteem. Maya also meets her first friend, Louise Kendricks, who helps Maya recapture her lost childhood.

Angelou's book dramatically illustrates many topics we study in the course. The first half of the book, which spans her early and middle childhood, offers examples of many issues: a sense of industry vs. inferiority; development of self-concept and -esteem; the adaptive use of fantasy; the growth of logic and concrete operational thought; child-rearing styles and family relations; gender issues; friendship and the "society of children"; and effects of different environments on development. The book's second half is a compelling history of the challenges of puberty and identity formation in adolescence. This part of the book illustrates family issues; functions of the peer group and cliques; emergence of formal operational thought; formation of a sexual identity; exploration of vocational interests; and, ultimately, parentho d. Throughout, the book is valuable because it offers the unfolding of one child's development, a process not typically captured by theory and research.

Despite her hardships, Angelou not only survives but thrives. As a case study, Angelou's childhood is a classic example of resilience (Werner, 1984). In fact, one student

said the book "corresponded so well to work on resiliency, it seemed as if Angelou read the research before writing her story." Angelou's incredible story of survival moved one student to state "Angelou's powerful prose opened my eyes unlike any book I've read." Another student said "literature helps because it's more forceful than the other stuff we read."

With the book, I assign a paper in which students are asked to analyze aspects of Angelou's development using theory and research from the course. Students use the course to explain Angelou's development, and use Angelou's experiences to illustrate the course. In short, students are urged to make connections between the general and the particular. This process helps students appreciate the complexity of development, develops their ability to integrate course materials, and helps them understand diversity--of race, gender, social class--in development. One student wrote that the assignment helped her "integrate culture, resiliency, and development in a child four years old to junior high." Many others have said the assignment "makes the abstract concrete"; one wrote it allowed her to "bounce back and forth between the personal and scientific." The Angelou assignment enhances understanding of development, as the high ratings (M = 4.6 of 5) in Table 1 demonstrate.

Insert Table 1 about here

Angelou's childhood account is such a powerful psychological journey for the reader

that I am confident students remember much about development because of this book. The potency of the assignment are captured in the comments of a student who wrote "I will remember the book and assignment for a very long time," and another who said the assignment was "the most rewarding and beneficial I've had in college."

Integrating literature into the course

Let me emphasize that literature is not a substitute for scientific theory and research; rather, it should be used as a supplement. This status does not diminish its impact, however; in fact, students' comprehension of course material is deepened because of literature. Also, integrating literature with theory and research is a balancing act, and instructors should do this according to their objectives. Instructors must also realize that not all childhood accounts are appropriate; some are more amenable to psychological analysis than others (Williams & Kolupke, 1986). There are many literary sources instructors might use, and I list in the Appendix childhood : counts, most factual that instructors could consider.

I also believe instructors should use literature that depicts the diversity of human development. Not only is this educational, but students' own cultural diversity warrants the treatment of such varied experience. Some students may be shocked by Angelou's crucible, but it enlightens them; one wrote the book "expanded my white, middle-class outlook," and another wrote that it "addressed culture and development in a manner that's interesting and not biased." Other students, because of their backgrounds, may identify with her struggles.

For an account that contrasts with Angelou's, I recommend Annie Dillard's (1988) An American Childhood. Both authors have a gift for finding psychological richness in the most mundane aspects of childhood, but whereas Angelou's childhood is imbued with racism and marred by family fragmentation and sexual trauma, Dillard's childhood is happily grounded in her affluent, literate parents who provide unconditional love and support. The Dillard and Angelou books are valuable because each presents a childhood that will be familiar to some students but foreign to others. The authors' radically different experiences reflect cultural and class differences that exist in many of our classrooms.

Another consideration is when to use literature in the course. I have used Angelou as a final assignment, and also as an integrated one throughout the course. Although both formats have been successful, the course-ending assignment is most effective at synthesizing material we covered. One student wrote, "the book and paper was a marvelous way to bring together concepts we discussed all semester," and another said, it was "a powerful culmination of the course." Briefer readings would fit easily at any point.

Early in his career in psychiatry, Robert Coles was urged by his supervisor to get to know his patients by using "more stories, less theory" (Coles, 1989, p. 27). My conclusion takes the form of a similar plea: In addition to scientific psychology, teachers should offer students stories that will help them understand development. These stories ought to also possess the personal and spiritual resonance to bring students to worlds beyond their own.

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Table 1

Student responses to the question "Rate the Angelou book and assignment in terms of its educational value to you"

	Rating					
	5 Excellent	4 Very good	3 Good	2 Fair	1 Poor	Total
Number	84	18	6	2	1	111
Percent	76	16	5	2	1	100

Note. The sample consists of students enrolled in five courses.